CHAPTER 18

AIR FORCE BEGINS TELEVISION OPERATIONS

The Korean Conflict and the Cold War of the 1950s insured that Armed Forces Radio would continue as a viable organization. During this period, AFRS faced the same challenge to its operations and programming as did commercial radio throughout the United States. By the end of the Korean Conflict, television brought about the end of network radio's monopoly on entertainment programming. Local radio stations had to restructure their broadcast day. In most instances, this meant a move to an all-music format of either popular, jazz, big band, country and western, classic, or some combination format.

At AFRS Headquarters, the programming staff faced the same challenge in replacing network entertainment programming in the transcription package it distributed. The need to fill the weekly entertainment package became a continuing concern. The AFRS solutions resembled those developed by commercial outlets, including increased disc jockey shows, added special informational features, and more sports from the commercial network radio operations.

AFRS took two directions in providing music shows sent out in the transcription package: First, they recorded local disc jockey programs, usually from the Los Angeles area. Information spots replaced commercials on these programs, sent out on disks. Second, AFRS increased the number of in-house produced radio shows, usually hosted by other disc jockeys under contract with AFRS. The latter shows had the advantages of being directed specifically to the military audience. They did not require the decommercializing step. Finally, AFRS increased the size of the local music libraries so that outlets had access to a sufficient number of records to support their locally produced disc jockey shows.

THE AIR FORCE PIONEERS

Despite the mission of bringing to the troops "a little bit of home," AFRS headquarters did not respond to the sudden explosion of television. No initiatives were made at AFRS to provide TV to American Forces overseas. Television would start as a solution for a morale problem in the Strategic Air Command.

In early 1947, General Curtis LeMay received a recommendation from his own staff that his commands build small television stations to boost morale at isolated SAC bases. As television grew, LeMay explored the subject with his friend Arthur Godfrey. The famous personality was a car racing and hunting companion. He agreed that an economical, small television station could be developed for use in remote areas. Planners also saw the usefulness of television in providing information and education. Since television was just getting off the ground commercially, the Air Force confined its interest to memos, which anticipated future use.(1)

Meanwhile, the advent of the Cold War brought about vast changes within the military. From the initial headlong demobilization at the close of World War II, the United States began to rearm in response to Soviet actions in Central Europe. The Army, Navy and the new, separate Air Force started to deploy forces in almost as many remote overseas locations as during the war.

The new peacetime conditions would inevitably require a military television network, just as the need during the WWII led to the development of Armed Forces Radio. One significant difference existed. With no war, servicemen found less urgency in their work. The absence of combat increased interest in off-duty activities and a desire for the same things troops had back in the United States. The narrow range of entertainment options at most overseas Armed Forces bases created boredom and prompted the military to provide significant recreational activities.

The need for these activities received an additional emphasis. In an era of rapid technological advances, the Services were embarking upon a program to retain trained men and women for careers in the military. With the increase in military careers came an increase in the number of military families on military bases both in the United States and abroad. Wherever they found themselves, these military families as well as and the unmarried serviceman or woman, came to expect normal American entertainment. More and more, that meant commercial television.

By the end of the Korean Conflict, TV had ceased to be a novelty in the United States. Most people considered TV a normal household appliance. To deprive service men and women of such an accustomed source of entertainment would affect morale, enlistments and retention of trained personnel. This problem particularly affected the Strategic Air Command. It had both a large number of remote facilities and a specific need for highly skilled personnel to maintain its sophisticated equipment. As a result, Curtis LeMay redoubled his efforts to provide television to his men. By early 1953, the Air Force was developing plans to put a low-power television prototype station on the air.

SAC ultimately considered two possible locations for the prototype station, Rapid City Air Force Base in South

Dakota and Limestone Air Force Base in northern Maine. Limestone was far from any commercial television station signal. Therefore, an Air Force TV station not be a competition for service. Also, there were no with which it might compete. No immediate plans existed for a civilian station in the area, which might force an early termination of the experiment. SAC did, however, have to obtain FCC approval of the project. To do so, SAC had to agree that if a commercial station began in the area, the military TV station would go off the air. It also promised that the television transmitter would be limited to ten watts of power.

The location permitted easy access for technicians and the delivery of parts that a prototype station would require if problems developed during the shakedown period. The continental U.S. site also eased observation of the broadcast activities and evaluation of it's operation. Finally, the station provided an indirect benefit by giving the Air Force the opportunity to provide a service to the local population.

For LeMay's purposes, Limestone provided a good case study for dealing with many of the problems facing SAC. The base had an inordinately large military population compared to the number of civilians in the region. Limestone AFB had a population of 15,000 servicemen and their dependents. In contrast, the town of Limestone had a population of 864, while Caribou, ten miles away, had 4,500. Aroostock County, while large area-wise, had only 96,000. More important, the region around Limestone lacked a variety of recreational facilities for base personnel. In addition the local population was not on particularly good terms with the airbase. The rigorous winters, unpleasant for both the military personnel and their dependents, didn't help. And, the atmospheric and mineral nature of the area made radio reception poor. These local problems, when combined with SAC's operational requirements, created morale problems for dependents. The results were a high rate of AWOL and divorce.

Once the Air Force selected Limestone, it moved ahead rapidly to get the station on the air before Christmas. To do so, it had to solve two problems. First, acquire and set up the television equipment. Second, find and arrange for delivery of program material.

SAC gave the job of acquiring equipment to its Communications and Electronics Division. Lieutenant Colonel P.L. Moen, the Deputy Chief of the division, became the SAC Technical Project Officer. Moen made several unproductive inquiries to manufacturers. Then, with the help of General LeMay, he contacted David Sarnoff, President of RCA. After Moen informed him of the problem, Sarnoff referred him to the company's Camden, New Jersey plant for assistance.

On August 13, two RCA representatives did an on-the-spot survey of the Limestone facilities. They would determine the precise location for the studio and the type of equipment that they would need. The planners determined that space on top of the hospital offered the best location for the station and antenna.

With the site selection completed, the RCA representatives returned to Camden with the mission of drawing up television studio plans. The plans considered the limitations of space and money, but provided for the greatest versatility for immediate use and future expansion. To fulfill these goals, RCA produced three plans, one costing $18,000, one $24,000, and one $28,000. None provided for "live" in-house production of programs. SAC decided to purchase the $28,000 package with modifications that provided for "live" telecasting and for ancillary equipment for a greater scope of production activity. Financing for the studio came from SAC's Welfare Funds. The setup included a videcon camera chain, a 16mm projector, monitoring equipment, synchronizing generator, other necessary electronic equipment and an eight-watt transmitter. The studio received a turntable and an RCA tape recorder to play fill music.

While SAC and RCA were solving the equipment problems, the Air Force began efforts to provide programming. Despite the obvious expertise of AFRS in obtaining program material, SAC didn't approach the Los Angeles headquarters for help. They chose instead to go directly to the major networks in New York. The Chief, Procurement and Projects Branch, Personnel Services Division, SAC assumed the job of procurement. He arranged a meeting with representatives from the major television networks. The meeting produced an agreement that the Procurement and Projects Branch would obtain clearances for network productions. To do this, the staff would contact sponsors, agencies, networks and other parties to acquire rights to use the shows. The office also would handle any union clearances that might be necessary. The Army and Air Force Motion Picture Service would act as courier for receiving and shipping of films from New York to Limestone.

To provide an official sanction for the budding new medium, the Department of Defense issued a memorandum on October 28, 1953. Signed by Dr. John Hannah, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Personnel, it formally established an Armed Forces television activity. It stated that the Office of Armed Forces Information and Education had the responsibility for plans and policy for radio, motion pictures and publications.

"Television potentially provides an additional medium of communication capable of exerting a strong, favorable influence on the information and education program of the Armed Forces," the DoD memorandum said.

"It will be appreciated if the Secretaries of the Army, Navy and Air Force will coordinate all television use with the Office of Armed Forces Information and Education," it continued. "OAFIE is responsible for the development and supervision of Armed Forces information and education television plans and policy."

In turn, OAFIE issued DoD Directive 5000.4, which set forth the objectives of Armed Forces Television. It called for a "balanced fare of information and education programs" to be furnished to all Armed Forces Radio and Television stations. The programs were to be written or chosen, produced and distributed "based on the accomplishment of the information and education objective. That is, to foster in the serviceman attitudes conducive to military efficiency, the mission of the Armed Forces, American democratic principles and an increasing knowledge of national and international affairs."

Clearances for the use of the various shows started to arrive in October and November as work progressed on the 10-foot by 13-foot studio. The station would go on the air Christmas Day. The base Information Services Officer knew one man who had some radio announcing experience and a working knowledge of radio station procedures. As a result, he became program director with the ISO acting initially as station manager. The maintenance and engineering personnel came under the supervision of an officer who'd volunteered his services after his regular duty hours. The station received four men assigned on a permanent basis, two from the Armament and Electronics Squadron and two from the Communications Section. None of the men had television experience, but the maintenance officer had significant experience in radio. One of the enlisted men worked at one time with the AFRS. The other three men were radio, radar and communications equipment mechanics.

The equipment, minus the transmitter, antenna and turntable arrived on December 21. The transmitter reached Limestone and the 23rd and the staff began to set up the equipment. That evening, an engineer from RCA arrived to help check out the system. Everyone worked until four O'clock the next afternoon. Although not in perfect order and lacking an antenna, the station went on the air on the target date. The staff used a makeshift set-up that transmitted a good picture but somewhat inferior audio signal. It was not until February 10, 1954, that they finally installed the proper antenna.

Although the film for the first day's broadcasting didn't arrive until December 24, the Christmas day inaugural of military broadcasting went off with few difficulties. Programming began with the sign-on and test pattern at 5:45 PM. News aired at 6:00. "Littlest Angel" followed, then "Rootie Kazootie," "Child of Bethlehem," "Guiding Star," "You Can Change the World," "Jamie," "U.S. Steel Hour," and "Comeback Story." News at 8:00 PM closed the broadcast day. Because of the lack of programming, the station initially broadcast only on Friday, Saturday and Sunday with the four-hour evening schedule. As the weeks passed, the schedule expanded as the commercial networks began to supply more and more material. The station supplemented that with films from the Air Force Film Library and from the Allied Artists and Republic Pictures motion picture companies.

Soon, the station was able to schedule between thirty-three and forty hours a week of filmed shows that it supplemented with three "live" shows. The "Chaplain Hour" was a fifteen-minute talk ("hour" sounded better than "quarter-hour") delivered every Sunday by one of the base Chaplains or a visiting clergyman. The second was a weekly news summary, prepared and presented by an officer from Wing intelligence. The third, "LAFB Personalities," attempted to present interesting people from the base who were entertaining and had something of interest to offer. These included a hypnotist, a fire-eater and an airman who did three dimensional paintings. By the end of January, the station was also doing three live news shows a day.

Despite the limited transmition equipment and the bare-bones nature of the studio, the Limestone station remained on the air with only a one-and-a-half hour interruption. That was to fix the synchronizing generator. On February 10, operations stopped for one day to install the new antenna. After the installation, the airmen assigned to the station did all the maintenance and engineering. Given the conditions under which they had to work and their initial lack of experience in television, their "ingenuity and resourcefulness was amazing to the point of unbelief."(2) Again, such is the legacy of armed forces broadcasting.

Shortly after the station went on the air, Limestone Air Force Base had its name changed to Loring and SAC began to assign additional personnel to the television operation. John Bradley, a Sergeant who'd been doing public relations work for General LeMay, arrived at the station soon after it went on the air. He recalled that Maine "is not really one of the great places in the world to be stationed." That was particularly true in the winter and even more so for the television staff. The studio atop the hospital at Loring it was inside a structure built of metal I-beams and enclosed with corrugated metal. It housed mainly elevator equipment and had no insulation or heating.(3)

In the summer, the men had to work half-naked because of the temperatures. Winter was worse, and it "presented some really interesting problems. We always

had to operate with parkas and frequently with gloves on, which we removed solely for adjusting and changing film."

The men soon found a more mundane problem. The television equipment was initially on the same electrical line as the hospital elevator. Every time someone used the lift, it caused a drop in power creating problems with the broadcast signal. The staff solved this by hooking up to a separate power source.(4)

Despite working without any backup equipment in case of breakdowns, the station at Loring accomplished everything which General LeMay had hoped. Major Peter Bekker wrote A *Report on the Morale Effectiveness of AFL-TV*, in January, 1956. It summarized the changes that had occurred during the first two years the station was on the air. In early 1954, shortly after the broadcast operation began, the AWOL rate at Loring was 20 per 1,000 men. By the beginning of 1955, the rate had fallen to 2.5 per 1,000. From January to June, 1955, the period that normally had the highest AWOL rate, the base maintained a rate of 2 men per 1,000. In early 1954, the base had a rate of 22 summary courts per month. By the end of the year, they conducted 4 or 5 per month and during 1955, the rate dropped to 1 or 2 per month. For SAC, the important figures had to do with reenlistments. From no reenlistments at all in the early months of 1954, the number rose to 12 by the end of the year. By March, 1955, the rate had risen to 18 per month.(5)

Major Bekker's *Report* continued, "In the field of human reaction, we can build an even more solid case for AFL-TV. Fan letters for our various live shows average sixty a week. This figure jumps considerably for special presentations. The United Fund drive used AFL-TV quite effectively last year and it will use it again this year to encourage donations." In addition, the Dependents Assistance Program, which Bekker called "a must on every SAC installation," rose to ninety-percent participation, "solely through the television programming information. At this point, Loring has one of the most effective dependent's assistance programs in SAC." While acknowledging that the letters may not prove conclusive in themselves, Bekker believed that they provided "one of the truest guides. They demonstrate sincere appreciation for the efforts of the station."(6)

Although SAC had initiated the move to television, other commands in the Air Force observed the significant impact of TV. They initiated efforts to bring television overseas. The Commander of the Military Air Transport Service (MATS) took action early in 1954 to install TV stations in all isolated bases under MATS operational control. After surveying locations, MATS obtained approval from the television networks to extend the original Limestone agreements. They negotiated with the Portuguese Government and received permission to install a station in the Azores. Station CSL-TV began at Lajes Field, in the Azores, on October 17, 1954. The next station to go on the air was AJG-TV at Wheelus Field, Tripoli, on December 22, 1954.

In the meantime, the Department of Defense established the Television Section of the Information Branch, Office of Armed Forces Information and Education in February, 1954.

AFRTS ESTABLISHED

OAFIE issued a letter on April 21, 1954, which changed the name of AFRS to Armed Forces Radio and Television Service (AFRTS). On September 14, the Television Section became the Television Branch, Information Division. On October 29, the Office issued DoD Instruction 5120.2. It was to govern all Armed Forces television operations.

As set forth in this original Instruction, the mission of Armed Forces Television Service was much like radio. It was "to provide United States Armed Forces personnel overseas, and in isolated areas where commercial programs are not available, television programs for information, education and entertainment."

AFRTS assumed the responsibility for providing programming to the growing number of stations, but battles still had to be fought. The initial shows which Limestone received had advertising included. They made no effort to decommercialize them. This practice continued during the early months of the station's operations, despite AFRTS' objections as soon as it became involved. On September 23, 1954, Commander E. F. Hutchins, USN, then OIC in the AFRTS Headquarters, sent a memorandum to General Harland Hartness, the Director of OAFIE. He responded to Hartness's statement that the policy of not decommercializing television programs "would be inescapable." The networks had been insisting on keeping advertisements in the shows they were furnishing. Hutchins noted, "If we are to accept this as a firm basis for our expansion into television, I'm afraid we'll, of necessity, find ourselves forced into an indefensible position. In other words, what is the difference between Jack Benny on AM or TV? Why is it acceptable to hear and see the Lucky Strike Commercial on an Armed Forces Television Station, but not on its radio counterpart?"

Decommercializing the television programs would have to be done for the same reasons that the AFRS shipped programs during the war without advertisements. All concerned parties agreed. AFRTS developed the techniques needed to edit out advertisements. What AFRTS didn't do was enter into the production of its own entertainment television programs. The cost would have been prohibitive.

The mission of AFRTS remained the same as that of

AFRS, to provide the same programming the service men and women in the field had watched back home. That is, "a little bit of home."

As a result, the television side of the AFRTS operations in Los Angeles always remained a distribution activity rather than a creative production center. The creativity that did develop within the organization did so at the local level where the staffs did news and special live programs. Limits imposed by budgets, equipment and available staff generally precluded the production of major programs.

However, since the arrival of live satellite delivered programming a new form of creativity has developed at the AFRTS Broadcast Center. The acquisition and scheduling of live TV programming will form the care of future programming to satisfy the needs of America's service men and women. Television in the '80s has made the operation in Los Angeles at true broadcast facility.

The success with which AFRTS has fulfilled its television mission has continued to this day. It's all a tradition begun in primitive facilities by a small group of airmen at Limestone Air Force Base in 1953.

"...By airmen, for airmen." And, the story continues.

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(1) Interview with John Bradley, March 18, 1984. Also, Major James J. Weldon, Information Services Officer, Headquarters 42nd Air Base Group, OIC, "A.F.T.V. Station, Limestone AFB, Maine - Final Report", [n.d. 1956]. Cited hereafter as Weldon. Also, Lieutenant Colonel M. Williamson, November 3, 1955.
(2) Weldon.
(3) Bradley interview, March 28, 1984.
(4) Ibid.
(5) Ibid.